

Making the Most of Community



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Table of Contents

- 1) Intro: Making the Most of Community
- 2) How To Become A Pillar In Your Community
- 3) How to Spot and Solve Issues With Parents and Within
Your Community
- 4) Parent-Teacher Conferences: The “How-To”
- 5) Conclusion: Be Involved!

MAKING THE MOST OF COMMUNITY



A school is a community in itself. The challenge is to get parents, community members, and practicing professionals from outside to become familiar and comfortable with the school, and get teachers, students, and other faculty from the school outside into the community. In this chapter, educators must look at the school and the community as if they are one, not separate. Teachers, and other people who hold high stress level jobs tend to get sucked into their own little world of work, especially if they do not live in the community, or do not have children. It is easy to turn a blind eye to the happenings in a community, but educators must understand a saying from the traditional African Proverb, “It takes a whole village to raise a child.” Every element must be taken into consideration when teaching students. The relationships formed between teachers and parents, students and teachers, and teachers and community members are essential for development.

How To Become A Pillar In Your Community

By Lauren Crosby

Observation

The first step to becoming a pillar in your society is to step back and simply observe students. Their needs, their wants, their interests, and the type of music they like, etc. all lead to a common core. Us as educators need to understand that we must observe students for reasons beyond their learning styles and abilities. If we know a student enjoys playing chess, we could think of thousands of ways to incorporate that into the student's community. Perhaps we could start a chess club, or host a chess tournament as a fundraiser and get community members involved to raise money to fund the chess club. The possibilities are endless and it all starts with a simple observation. By observing students, it shows that we care and are diligently yet stealthily taking note of our students. When we surprise our students by saying, "Hey! Have you heard the new Black Keys Album?" because you observed that they were listening to them during their free time, you can really connect with the student in that small, yet significant moment. Sometimes that's all it takes to gain the students attention, and respect. Students may also feel as if they can confide in you because you can relate to them. This leads to healthy and lasting relationships not only in the classroom, but down the road as well.

If a teacher chooses not to observe his or her students, it shows that they may not be fit for the teaching life style. By not observing, teachers can miss crucial aspects of the dynamic works of their students. It can be the smallest of incidents too, such as where students sit, or what the student wears. We as teachers are not only educators, we are scientific observers. Lacking empathy and understanding for students immediately sets the classroom tone towards "boring" and "dry." Educators must engage their students, while catering to their individual needs. It is not easy, but observing a child can open the door to how their community may function.

Not only observing students is beneficial, but observing the community and it's surroundings as well. Where is the school located? Is it in a safe neighborhood? How do students get to school? Do they take their cars, or ride the train, or bus? These questions are something that all teachers need to know to be able to properly assess the schools community.

Community Needs

"Education as a total process, in which the condition of society deeply affect the child's minds, the level of his achievement, and the range of his possibilities." (Taylor, 1961)

One must be able to observe their students and community, and take into consideration community needs. Every community in the world is different, and for that matter, every family in the world is different. An educator cannot just jump into a school and start changing things that they think are right or wrong. Educators must also observe the community and the community's history. There are many things that

make up a community; restaurants, businesses, arts, schools, hospitals, and practicing professionals. Is your community a shipbuilding community, where most of your student's parents are working in the shipyard or the mills? Is your community thriving with hospitals and law offices? Are you going to be teaching in a city near the "ghetto" part of town, where students might have other obligations to take care of their siblings and hold part time jobs in order to support their families? These are all things that need to be considered when adapting to the community in which you live.

Take time for yourself to explore and dive into the cultural history of your community. Get lost, and become familiar with the geological features of your location. Talk to locals about how things used to be, and how they are now. Also spend time with your colleagues. Solicit local businesses or restaurants so people can become familiar with your face. You must use that same sophisticated scientific observation skill that all teachers are equipped with to become oriented and a well-known face in the community.

By understanding how the community works, you can clearly see what needs improvement. For example, maybe your community is not visually pleasing, or perhaps there is not a thriving downtown where young people can share their poetry or music. Understand what needs improvement, and research it. If there is an aspect of the community lacking that you truly care about, **DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT**. This is the most important lesson; you **MUST** do something about it! It is very easy to talk to your colleagues or friends about what needs to be done, or what should be done, however, very few people execute their feelings. Talk is cheap, as the old saying goes. You as an educator are a role model, a leader, and an important role in our society. "Be the change you want to see in the world" as Gahndi says.



Being Reliable

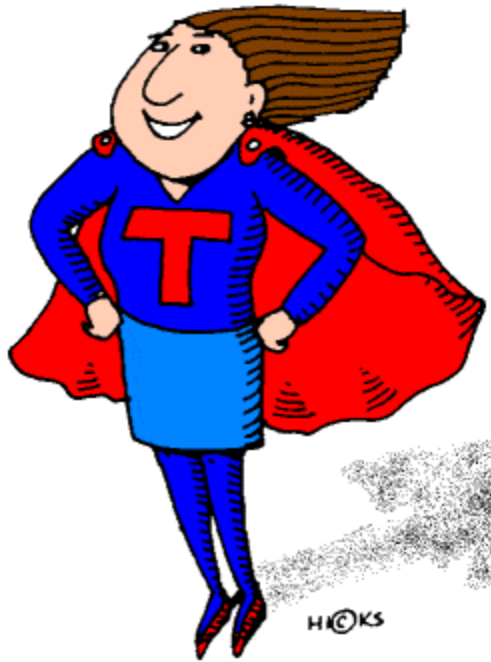
It is important to be known as a reliable source in your community. Students, teachers, parents, and community members need to feel as if they can approach you and be able to accomplish goals, as well as working out problems, without you "flaking out". Many schools and districts have seen "the run around

teacher” that only stays a couple months and then leaves. If you want to become a strong pillar in the community, you’ve got to be reliable and tolerable. Again, an educator is also modeling behavior for their students. Wendy Simpson, 7th grade Language Arts Teacher from Mount Blue Middle School in Farmington says, “Some people who you think are pillars in the community are actually rotted wooden boards.” We want our children to be reliable members of society with numerous amounts of things that can not be taught in a formal lesson; paying bills on time, being there for family and friends, and showing support for causes they believe in.

Finding Causes That Are Important

As you know, there are going to be many issues in the community, and even though we as educators are wonder woman's and superman's, it is impossible for us to tackle every single issue. It is best to find issues that are important to you as a person, issues that you believe in fixing or looking more into. It is never fun when you begin working on a project that your heart is not into. The task soon becomes tedious and monotonous, and students will be able to tell when you are not fully committed. If you grew up practicing sustainability, and feel very passionate towards the topic, bring it into your school! Start a recycling club, or encourage your students to practice sustainability in your classroom, such as always shutting the lights off, or not using plastic water bottles.

It is also important to find causes that are important to your students. Listen to what the students have to say, and observe their interests and wants. By making surveys or questionnaires, students have a chance to voice their opinions and concerns. This gives you the power as an educator to take their thoughts and turn them into positive actions. Students are apart of the community; an educator must remember this when they are planning out their lessons. Children play such an active role in the community that if you get them enthusiastic about a cause, there is a good chance that the effect will spread briskly. We see this in movies such as “Coach Carter” and “The Freedom Writers,” Whole communities changing due to the catalyst of the students. This is a healthy part of being a citizen, and an active member of society. We want our students to take pride in what they do!



“It’s The Little Things You Say”

Wendy Simpson quotes, “It’s the little things you say, you always have to keep your guard up and stay positive... in other words, if you don’t have anything nice to say, only say it in the privacy of your own home!” The general rule for teachers of all ages is to keep thoughts personal and confidential. The walls of the teachers room and very thin, and so are the walls of the school grounds. Educators need to be constantly maintaining a filter; in the grocery line, at a party, at the gym, or any public place in general. Even if talking to a trusted friend, someone may over here your thoughts on a student, and that person may know the parents, or maybe even been in relation. To avoid these situations, Wendy Simpson chimes in with “Say only what you need to say.” In a small community, one must be careful what they say, not only around students, but also around other teachers, parents, and colleagues. This is to ensure our student’s privacy is protected. Being a “gossip queen” is not the type of person anyone tends to gravitate to when they are trying to seek out a trusted adult. Students need somebody they are able to talk to, without feeling like their confidentiality is going to be taken advantage of. In a large community, where a teacher sees more than hundreds of students a day, this tends to not be an issue. In a small school however, everybody tends to know everybody, and though this can be of great value when trying to maintain a tight nit community, it can lead to petty confrontations and small town gossip.

Connecting To Students

Perhaps equally as important to educating our students, is connecting with them as human beings. As adults, we hold the power to do whatever we want in a school setting. Students look up to us, yet,

depending on the grade level, evaluate us in every which way. Educators are not sitting at their desks pondering how they can become best friends with their students, but educators should at least want their students to like them as people.

By starting a club or a program outside of school, teachers are able to see their students in an informal setting. This provides each of the participants to better familiarize themselves with each other, and can lead to lasting relationships. This may also make the student feel more comfortable when seeking out academic help in the classroom. It also begins to bridge the gap between schools and the outside community.

Coaching is also a great way for an educator to expand their boundaries as a teaching professional. In this field, educators are able to meet many more students because they may not have had the opportunity to have them in class. This broadens the horizon to meet more families, more coaches, and more fans. If the sports team does well, the community tends to start following the stats, and even may come to some games. This is just one of the hundreds of ways to make a positive impact on the community.

The Importance Of Families In The School

“A child cannot be educated adequately unless all the forces that act upon the child are considered.” (Sari 1972) The plans that a teacher makes need to be effective in the school, as well as the student’s home. Consistency among parents and teachers is extremely important because it brings both parties to the same page, and can open up doors for communication.

A student that has parents or family members at home who are willing to help them with homework, or volunteer actively in the classroom or other extra curricular activities in which the student partakes, only betters the child’s realm of education. We as educators must try hard to make our lessons as realistic as possible, and this happens by making sure that students have a healthy and supportive learning environment at home, and if not at home, someplace in the community. The more families are actively involved in the schools community, the more growth and development will show in the outside community.

Associations like the PTA (Parent/Teacher Association) help again, to bridge these gaps between the schools community, and the outside community.



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INTERVIEWEE

Wendy Simpson has been a Middle School Language Arts teacher at Mt. Blue Middle School for over eight years now. She has a different style and philosophy than most teachers in her realm: the students always come first, not matter what. Wendy enjoys traveling and learning. In her classroom, she incorporates numerous amounts of visuals, as well as audio to help the children open their minds. Wendy graduated from the University Of Maine at Farmington, and also owned her own book shop in Franklin County before returning to education.

How to Spot and Solve Issues with
Parents and Within Your
Community

By Anna LeClair



What are potential Issues you could see with parents and within a community?

It takes a village to raise a child. This saying is no different in today's world. To expect teachers to be the only source of support and motivation for students would be to cut off a whole world of opportunity and support for students. A panel of education experts have recognize that "the education of a person includes educational, social, emotional, physical and cultural development. This requires a partnership of schools, communities and citizens". (D6) Many teachers today express how disconnected parents are with students education. But there is hope! "According to the recent MetLife Survey of the

American Teacher, teachers, parents and students all agree that parent engagement in schools has increased over the past 25 years” (Annie)

“Data compiled in 2005 show that 17 states have directed all districts or schools to implement parental involvement policies. Seven states—Alaska, California, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, South Carolina, and Texas—have obligated schools or districts to develop policies linking parent-community partnerships to school improvement plans, and in Delaware, schools applying for school improvement grants must include parental involvement strategies in grant applications.”

(NEA) How interesting is it that community involvement hasn’t been obligated in all schools yet? It’s astounding how many people forget about the importance of the outside environment that students go through. As students grow older, parental involvement greatly declines. This can be disheartening to some educators, as student issues grow more complex and they still need these adults to support them through difficult and uncertain times.

Community:

There’s a section in the resources for excellence book that talks about all the important components to look for to make sure that a community organization is successful and supportive. What they did was they went to all schools throughout maine and listed all the characteristics that made them successful.

- appropriate funding provided by the community
- a significant community presence in the school
- all interested parties actively involved in school governance
- training programs for participants
- an atmosphere of congeniality, cooperation, and parent/community ownership
- school board, administration, teachers and staff demonstrate active commitment to the program
- involvement based on needs of parent/community members and school
 - paid coordinator of volunteer programs
 - school personnel actively solicit volunteer talent
 - two way communication is stressed
 - an active parent-teacher organization
- significant long term involvement in school programs
- yearly review of self-evaluation/accreditation goals by all participants
- regular parent teacher conferences at all grade levels
- involvement programs an integral part of the curriculum
- recreational and enrichment activities available for all” (LaChance)

If we are to notice that parts of this list are missing in our community organizations, it’s certainly in our best interest to look at how we could change this.

Communities are often facing economical struggles everyday. There are times where our students aren’t in their first thought when it comes to building their community. Instead they are just

focused on paying bills and dissolving crime. It's our job to help remind the communities that our students are here and they have relevance.

Parents:

Many parents have **busy schedules** that keep them from getting involved in their child's school life. They don't have the time to volunteer or the **money** to fund many of the activities that could help enrich their child's education. Many parents feel as though all the connection they've had with school or teachers have been negative. This typically roots from the fact that for many parents, when they are contacted by the school it's for **health or disciplinary problems**. Even when schools reach out positively to parents, many parents still have difficulties trusting schools because of their own **past experiences**. There are other barriers that parents may have such as **cultural or language differences** that may make communication with their students teachers seem uncomfortable for them. Other parents just **don't feel adequate** and have no idea how to find or use resources around them to help with their students education.

Parents often express frustration with **school bureaucracies** and how they don't understand their policies. Often when schools reach out to parents they bury the parents with **educational jargon** that is unfamiliar. Many parents can't find **child care or transportation** to be able to attend events.

Many of the issues that these parents face may also play into issues that communities are facing such as: money, scheduling, and predisposed attitudes. So we must keep this in mind when looking for solutions to make changes in the community.

How do you solve community and parental based issues?

Our goals should be to limit the disconnect that we have with our community and parents. Community and Parents have a lot of struggles and we have to minimize as many issues as we can so we can make real change.

Community:

Dr. Joyce Epstein (Director of the Center on School, Family and Community Partnerships at Johns Hopkins University) said that "those serious about engaging families and communities begin

creating an Action Team for Partnerships. That team should include the principal, two-three teachers, two-three family members, and others in the school or community important to the school's work with families (a counselor, social worker, business partner, and so on, depending on the school context). At the high school level, she believes the team must include at least one or two students.” (NEA)

She also mentions “that team should choose four goals (two academic goals, one behavioral, and one focused on improving school climate) on which it will focus its efforts. It should then write and implement a one-year action plan, with activities carefully linked to their goals, monitoring outcomes and continually adjusting the plan as needed.”

As teachers we should also get our students connected to their community. Have them do assignments that require involvement with adults around town who are successful. Have them volunteer. Doing this shows the community that even though students are more often than not in a classroom setting, they are not losing their connection to the outside world. Some other suggestions to do this would be to organize workplace tours, to have community members come into your classroom and give presentations or teach lessons, interviewing community members, attend community events/concerts/meetings, have the students lobby for change they want in the community, encourage them to use all the resources of their community to enrich their project. There are many ways to get the community and the students connected.

Parents:

When it comes to parents, we have to start seeing them as students as well. A math teacher at Mt. Blue High school says “it can be amazing the difference you see in the performance of a child after you have talked and/or met with their parents.” (Ms. Arnold). We want parents to see a holistic view of their child and their education. We have to accommodate them in the best way possible to minimize barriers that get between the parent and their connection with their child and their education. If a parent can’t come in, how are you going to communicate with them? Skype? E-mail? Letters?. How are you going to assess the parents previous knowledge in order to be able to best help them understand what they can do and how they can do it? An english teacher from Maine talks about how she works with parents using an app called “Edumodo” “One cool thing from Edmodo is that there are parent codes, so I give them out to parents at PT conferences (which is actually tonight!) I also try to call home about something nice a student has done for me- mostly for the kids that you know don't always shine. I try to reach out to the parents of the kids who often get a bad rap and let them know what awesome thing their kid accomplished or did just because I think those are the families that need it most.” (Mrs. Ferry) To summarize how to work with parents, the NEA cites these main goals for areas to focus on when getting community and parents involved:

“■ Parenting. Assist families with parenting skills, family support, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions to support learning at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families’ backgrounds, cultures, and goals for children.

- ■ Communicating. Communicate with families about school programs and student progress. Create two-way communication channels between school and home that are effective and reliable.
- ■ Volunteering. Improve recruitment and training to involve families as volunteers and as audiences at the school or in other locations. Enable educators to work with volunteers who support students and the school. Provide meaningful work and flexible scheduling.
- ■ Learning at Home. Involve families with their children in academic learning at home, including homework, goal setting, and other curriculum-related activities.
- ■ Decision Making. Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, and other organizations.
- ■ Collaborating with the Community. Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with community groups, including businesses, agencies, cultural and civic organizations, and colleges or universities.”



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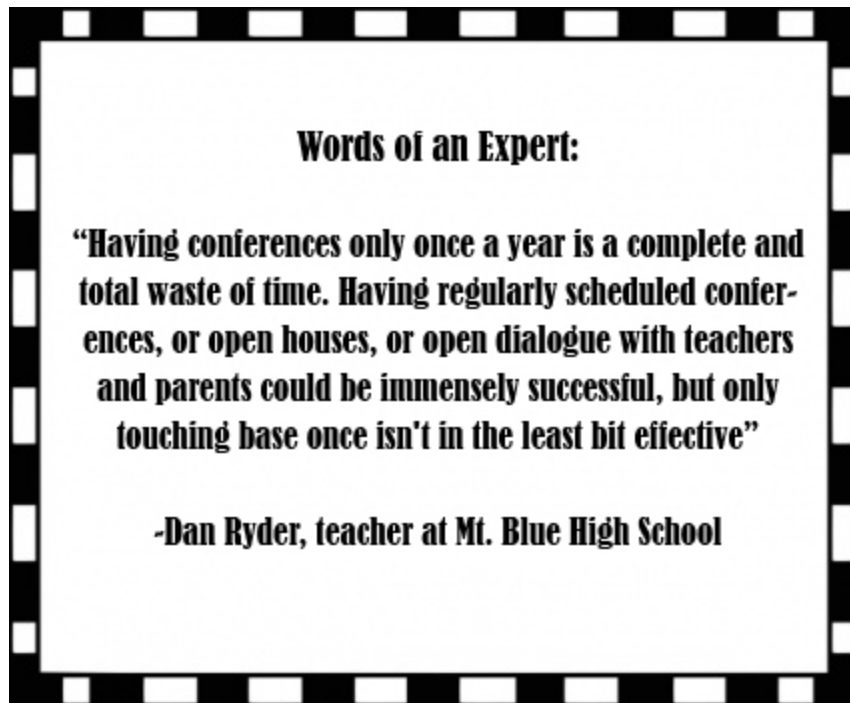
Parent-Teacher Conferences: The “How-To” By Lacey Campbell

Parent-Teacher conferences come with the territory of being a teacher, as implied by the name. Generally speaking, the policy of the school in which you work will dictate when conferences occur. Some

schools have them initially at the beginning of the first quarter, while others may have them at the end of a grading period where parents are given some sort of a report card.

Preparing to Prepare For The Conference(s):

- Send out invitations, either via the students or the mail, to parents informing them of conferences and inviting them to schedule a time to come meet with you. If the students parents are divorced but have shared custody, be sure to invite both parents.
- When setting conference times with parents who have multiple children in the same school, you should coordinate times with fellow staff members so that those parents can successfully visit the classrooms of all of their children.
- Once the conference time has been scheduled, you should send home some sort of a confirmation/reminder form home to the parents. This should also include the option to change the conference time as well as your contact information in the event that they can no longer make the scheduled conference. This should be sent a week to ten days in advance in order to allow you to reschedule all of the changes successfully.
- For those parents that can't be fit into the schedule or can't be rescheduled, they can be scheduled for the following week. In the event that a parent can't be met with at all, phone conferences can also be appropriate, and are definitely better than nothing. . However, it is important to keep in mind that in the event of this, the student isn't involved in the conference.
- If you have students whose first language isn't English, it is safe to assume that there is a language other than English being spoken in their home. In the event of this, you may require some sort of translator, which would need to be set up ahead of time. If you have several students whose first language isn't English, you should cluster these conferences together, especially if the same translator would be able to assist for all of the different languages.



Unauthorized Teacher Survival Guide by Jack Warner and Clyde Bryan with Diane Warner
ISBN: 1-57112-068-8

Actually Preparing For The Conference(s):

- Communicate the importance of conferences to as wide of an audience as possible. Not only will this help assure that students and their parents will be aware of the pending conferences, but it will help students to prepare. (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010.)
- In advance, communicate the goals and guidelines of the conferences. There should be no surprises here, and the more informed that the students and their parents are, the more successful the conferences are likely to be.
- Prepare notes for each conference. They don’t need to be extensive, just specific to the student. Make sure to make note of their strengths and weaknesses, but attempt to point out as many strengths as possible and to focus on the important weaknesses. “Just as you wouldn’t send a student to the principal for chewing gum, don’t burden parents with complaints not requiring their attention. (Warner, 1995, p.52)
- If the students have portfolios, have them ready. If it is report card time, have those.
- Have your classroom ready. If there are names or any sort of disciplinary notes on the board, make sure that it is erased. Have your room tidied up and student work displayed, having all students represented, because parents will look for their child’s work. Ensure that the environment

is comfortable- have parents meet with you at a table and not with a desk in between you or beside a filing cabinet.

- If conferences are booked back to back, set up a comfortable waiting area for parents to sit in as they arrive, but make sure it is out of earshot of the conference that is in progress.



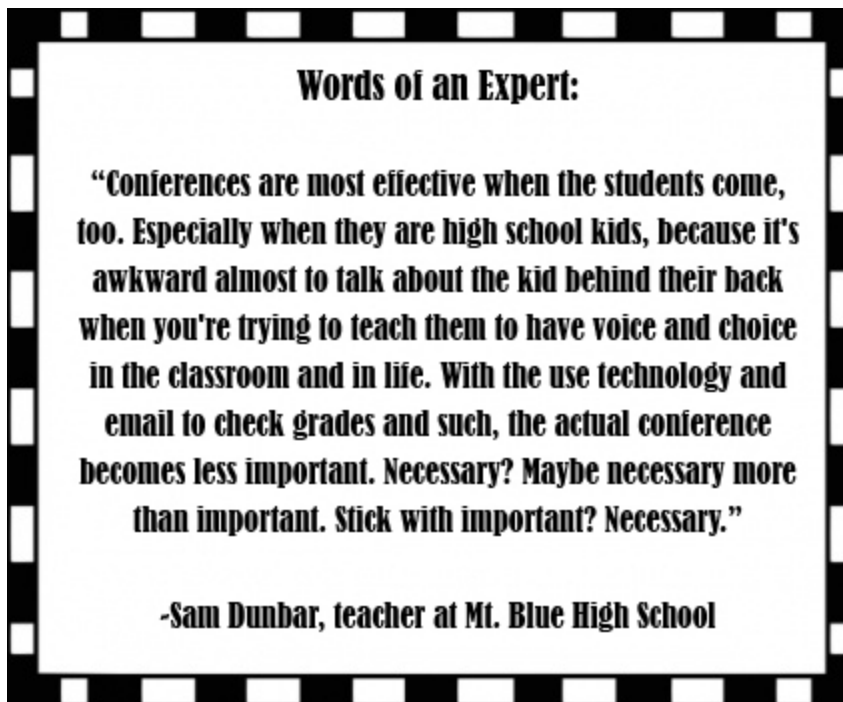
"Your kid throws up a lot."

During the Conference:

- Each conference usually lasts between 15 and 30 minutes. "Anything that needs to be said can usually be handled in this amount of time." (Warner, 1995, p.52.)
- It is important to stick to a schedule and not let any parent or parents monopolize your time. Not only is that inconsiderate to other parents who would be waiting, but it complicates their schedule as well, which could include meeting with other teachers. If there is a parent who is running over on their time, simply remind them politely of the schedule that you have to stick to in order to be fair to all students, and encourage them to follow up with you if they would like. According to the

Unauthorized Teacher Survival Guide, “usually the parent will get the idea, wrap it up, and leave without scheduling an additional conference.” (Warner, 1995, p.52) There is no need to use any sort of a clock or timer in order to stick to your schedule, as that is more rude and impersonal than helpful

- Be available! Ask other, more seasoned, teachers for advice if necessary and be willing to help them if needed (Harvard Family Research Project, 2010.)
- “The most important thing to remember is this: Listen 60 percent-talk 40 percent.” These are not filibusters. (Warner, 1995, p.53)
- Avoid comparing siblings at all costs, unless it is simply comparing personality traits, and even this should be done sparingly. If a parent is comparing their two children in some way, simply play the situation down, stating something about the natural differences of children and the progress they have both made.
- Consider making parents aware of other opportunities for family involvement in the school.
- Use layman’s terms. There’s no need to use any sort of terminology that the parents don’t understand. Not only could this make it seem like you’re either being condescending or simply showing off, but it could be both frustrating and entirely uninformative for the parents if they are not familiar with the terminology.
- Encourage parents to contact you at any point should they have any questions or concerns; keep the communication lines open.
- Be aware of your body language
- Try to end the conference on a positive note



Follow Up:

- You may find it helpful or useful to have parents fill out an anonymous questionnaire about the conferences once they have finished in order to improve your conferences in the future. “You’ll find that by offering the parents a chance for feedback, they will be convinced of your sincerity.” (Warner, 1995, p.56)
- Ensure that communication lines remain open between you and the parents so that they always feel comfortable with any inquiries about their child and you do as well.
- Give families opportunities to get and remain involved.

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Be Involved!

Overall, as educators we have a lot of responsibility to look after our students in the classroom. Yet, we should also do what we can to ensure that our students are getting the best that they can outside of the classroom as well. We have to look at all the ways we can promote involvement, respect, communication throughout the community and thus promote the success of our students.

Fin.